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The Emergence of the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln

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Entrenched in American politics is the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, the “Grand Old Party.” The ideology of the pre-contemporary Republican Party was much different than that of the party we know today. At its start, the Republican Party consisted of, for that time, radical ideas such as distribution of western governmental lands without charge and the abolition of slavery. Formed in 1854, the Republican Party has been at the center of American politics for more than a century and a half.

The Republican Party formed primarily as opposition to the Democratic Party. It consisted mainly of antislavery Whigs, whose party had dissolved by the end of 1854 due to conflict over the issue of slavery, the work of anti-slavery Democrats, and members of the Free-Soil Party. The latter had organized in 1848 to oppose the extension of slavery into the territories then recently acquired from Mexico. The central focus of this newly-formed political party became the abolition of slavery, an issue which aided the Republican Party in gaining recognition and support from the North. Before the Republicans could become a formidable rival to the Democrats, however, they needed to eliminate another rival anti-slavery group, the American Party, or the Know-Nothings, who were anti-immigration and anti-Roman Catholic as well as anti-slavery. The decline of the Know-Nothings removed an appealing alternative for voters dissatisfied with the Democrats and their policies, therefore, it attracted voters the Republicans needed in

order for them to become a viable national party. With the death of the American Party in 1855-1856, the Republicans became the main abolitionist party in the United States.

The election of 1856 was not a success for the Republicans, yet the party was satisfied with its strong presence in the North. They looked forward to the 1860 election with much anticipation.

During 1857 conditions favored the emergence of the new Republican Party. On March 6, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case that Congress lacked the power to ban slavery from the territories. This intensified Republican fears that the Southern slave states, through a court ruling, might legalize slavery nationwide. The battle over a free Kansas versus one that embraced slavery split the Democrats between the forces of Stephen A. Douglas and President James Buchanan. The Buchanan administration generally supported Southerners' taking slaves into Kansas and establishing the institution of slavery there. In this, Republicans saw a conspiracy to nationalize bondage. A severe economic downturn began in October 1857, causing a depression that lasted for four years, only adding to the woes of the Democrats.

Confidently, Republicans awaited the congressional elections of 1858. To take advantage of the public concern from economically difficult times, the party supported a protective tariff and homestead legislation to encourage western settlement. With the tide of events running their way, the Republicans made important gains. Doing well in valuable states such as Pennsylvania and winning victories in New York and Ohio made it clear that the party was attracting conservative voters from the North.

The election of 1858 also brought about the rise of Abraham Lincoln. He was a former Whig who turned Republican after his party died out in 1854 and ran against

Stephen A. Douglas in the Illinois senatorial election. Although he lost the election, the seven legendary debates in which the two opposed each other contributed greatly to Lincoln's political status and propelled him towards a nomination as the Republican Presidential candidate of 1860. On the other hand, the apparent choice, William H. Seward of New York, was already well-known for the anti-slavery cause. Yet Seward's criticism of nativism alienated former Know-Nothings. As a result, his shortcomings made many Republicans believe that he could not win the five northern states that went to Buchanan and the Democrats in 1856. Winning those states would be essential to Republican victory in the upcoming election.

By contrast, Lincoln was strong in the areas where Seward was not. Although Lincoln opposed the Know-Nothings, he had not said much to estrange them. He would be able to carry Illinois and Pennsylvania where Seward could not. Lincoln appeared sound on his position against slavery without the appearance of radicalism that Seward possessed.

By the spring of 1860, the Republican Party was looking for a nominee with a broad appeal. Lincoln proved to be that person when the convention at Chicago in May nominated him. The Republicans, standing on a platform that supported a protective tariff, a homestead law, internal improvements and the construction of a Pacific railroad, were endeavoring to appeal to a broader spectrum of voters.

When the Democratic split ensued, everything paid off for the Republicans. Lincoln, although winning less than forty percent of the popular vote, took all of the northern states except New Jersey, which he split with Douglas. Astonishingly, Lincoln earned 180 electoral votes to the combined total of 123 votes for his three opponents.

Abraham Lincoln, winning the 1860 presidential election, became the first Republican president elected, a monumental achievement for a party founded only six years before.

The Republican Party, Lincoln's party, began as a liberal, anti-slavery party and has evolved into one of political and social conservatism. Republicans have helped the way Americans live together in this democracy. Without Lincoln's association, the Republican Party may not have endured as one of the greatest and most prominent parties in American history. [From Joyce Appleby, et al. *The American Journey*; Lewis L.

Gould, *Grand Old Party*; The History Channel, "The Republican Party," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=220541>> (Nov. 17, 2008); The History Channel, "The Democratic Party," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=207371>> (Nov. 17, 2008); The History Channel, "The Democratic-Republican Party," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?vendorId=FWNE.fw..de035500.a#FWNE.fw..de035500.a>> (Nov. 17, 2008); The History Channel, "The Whig Party," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?vendorId=FWNE.fw..wh039800.a#FWNE.fw..wh039800.a>> (Nov. 17, 2008); The History Channel, "The Free-Soil Party," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?vendorId=FWNE.fw..fr082400.a#FWNE.fw..fr082400.a>> (Nov. 17, 2008); The History Channel, "The Know-Nothings," <<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?vendorId=FWNE.fw..kn045800.a#FWNE.fw..kn045800.a>> (Nov. 17, 2008); and The Republican National Committee, "GOP History," <<http://www.gop.com/About/AboutRead.aspx?Guid=a747a888-0ae6-4441-94f4-2a3a6561f872>> (Nov. 10, 2008).]